

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 2229

EXDIS

FOR MS DERIAN FROM AMBASSADOR WHITEHOUSE

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: SREF TH
SUBJECT: INDOCHINESE REFUGEES: THREAT TO FORCE OUT TO SEA
RECENTLY ARRIVED BOAT IN SONGKHLA

REF: A) GENEVA 872 B) BANGKOK 2004

1. I AM SORRY THERE WAS A MISUNDERSTANDING ON THIS CASE AND OVER OUR APPARENT HANDLING OF IT. REF B SHOULD HAVE MADE CLEAR THAT THE 16 REFUGEES WERE IN NO IMMEDIATE DANGER OF BEING SENT AWAY. IT WAS FOR THIS REASON WE KNEW THAT IT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO PUSH UNHCR INTO ACTION FIRST. FOLLOWING OUR EFFORTS WITH THE UNHCR, AND AS REPORTED BY BANGKOK 2179 (A REPEAT OF SONGKHLA 36), THE 16 WERE ACCEPTED.

2. TO RECOUNT THE HISTORY OF THIS CASE, THE EMBASSY RECEIVED ON THE MORNING OF JAN 19 OUR FIRST INFORMATION FROM THE CONSUL IN SONGKHLA THAT A BOAT OF 16 MIGHT HAVE ARRIVED THE PREVIOUS DAY. HENCE THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF INFORMING YOU BEFORE YOUR JAN 18 DEPARTURE. THE CONSUL MADE GREAT EFFORTS TO FERRET OUT INFORMATION ON THIS BOAT, ABOUT WHICH LOCAL AUTHORITIES
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WERE EXTREMELY RETICENT. WHEN HE FINALLY TRACKED DOWN THE VICE GOVERNOR LATER IN THE DAY, THE VICE GOVERNOR CONFIRMED THAT THE BOAT HAD ARRIVED AND STATED HIS INTENTION TO FORCE THE 16 BACK TO SEA.

4. UPON RECEIVING THIS INFORMATION FROM SONGKHLA, WE CONTACTED THE UNHCR REGIONAL REP IN BANGKOK WHO ATTEMPTED

TO REACH KEY MINISTRY OF INTERIOR OFFICIALS DEALING WITH REFUGEES. HE TRIED TO DO SO, BUT DISCOVERED THEY WERE TRAVELING IN THE SOUTH. WE THEN URGED HIM TO CONTACT PHIRAPHONG IN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY, PARTICULARLY SINCE YOU HAD JUST COMPLETED TWO DAYS OF TRAVEL TO REFUGEE CAMPS WITH HIM. THE UNHCR REP REACHED PHIRAPHONG WHO THEREUPON PHONED THE KEY MOI OFFICIALS IN THE FIELD.

5. THE CONSUL IN SONGKHLA REPORTED BY TELEGRAM JANUARY 20 THAT THE VICE GOVERNOR HAD ACCEPTED THE 16 VIETNAMESE AS REFUGEES. THIS TURNABOUT CAME LATE JAN 19 AFTER MEETINGS BETWEEN PROVINCIAL AUTHORITIES AND HIGH RANKING MOI OFFICIALS. PHIRAPHONG LATER CONFIRMED TO THE UNHCR REP THAT HE HAD REACHED THE MOI OFFICIALS IN THE FIELD AND MADE STRONG REPRESENTATIONS.

6. OUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE SONGKHLA VICE GOVERNOR OVER THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS IS THAT HE USES PERIODIC THREATS LIKE THIS IN AN ATTEMPT TO FORCE RAPID ACTION ON U.S. AND THIRD COUNTRY ACCEPTANCE OF REFUGEES. THE SUBSTANTIALLY LOWER NUMBER OF REFUGEES IN SONGKHLA THAN IN LAEM SING UNFORTUNATELY TESTIFIES TO THE SUCCESS OF THIS TACTIC ON HIS PART. WE HAVE FOUND THAT THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE THIS APPROACH IS THROUGH PRESSURE ON HIS SUPERIORS IN BANGKOK, RATHER THAN BY JUMPING THROUGH HOOPS IN SONGKHLA. IF THERE HAD BEEN AN IMMEDIATE THREAT OF CONFIDENTIAL

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DEPARTURE, I ASSURE YOU THAT WE WOULD HAVE REACTED MORE DIRECTLY.

7. I HOPE THIS EXPLANATION ILLUSTRATES THAT WE DID FOLLOW UP IN AN EFFECTIVE MANNER GIVEN THE FACT THAT THERE WAS NO THREAT OF IMMEDIATE EXPULSION. FURTHER, WE WILL BE CONTINUING TO DISCUSS THIS ISSUE WITH MOI SENIOR OFFICIALS IN BANGKOK TO BE SURE THEY REMAIN AWARE OF OUR DEEP CONCERN. I THINK YOUR VISIT AND THE INNUMERABLE REPRESENTATIONS I AND OTHER OFFICERS HERE HAVE MADE ON THIS SUBJECT OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS HAVE LEFT NO DOUBT WHATSOEVER IN THE MINDS OF THAI OFFICIALS ON THE AMERICAN POSITION ON THE GRANTING OF TEMPORARY ASYLUM TO BOAT CASES.
WHITEHOUSE

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